

## WETP workshop identifies strategies to promote effective safety cultures

By Ryan Campbell

The NIEHS Worker Education and Training Program (WETP) held a [workshop](http://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/events.cfm?id=2525) (<http://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/events.cfm?id=2525>) June 11-12 in Washington, D.C., to improve and expand the concept of safety culture, and identify challenges and solutions to ensure worker protection. Approximately 130 grantees, experts, and contractors attended the meeting, a workshop organized and co-sponsored by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and CPWR – The Center for Construction Research and Training, an NIEHS WETP grantee.

WETP Director Chip Hughes introduced the first guest speaker, Mark Griffon, a member of the U.S. Chemical Safety Board (CSB), as an avid supporter of worker safety and health, including his work with WETP grantees. As Griffon explained, “Safety culture is a term being used too loosely, and it [tends to be used to] blame the worker. Safety culture should look at an organizational structure, and the intended happening versus what happened, and why decisions were made the way they were” (see [text box](#)).

### Looking for solutions by identifying the causes of poor safety culture

Griffon highlighted several factors contributing to a poor safety culture, such as a lack of safety management leadership, discouraging injury and illness reporting, infrastructure failures, and the absence of responses to worker feedback, which are factors the CSB has identified in past facility accidents and disasters.

David Michaels, Ph.D., assistant secretary of labor for occupational safety and health at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, called for action to further support positive safety cultures. “Employers control the workplace, so we must have them on board. We need to push from a compliance culture to a health and safety management culture,” he said. Employee injury and illness programs support a robust safety culture and they help save lives, and help companies save money, Michaels continued.

WETP grantee Judith Daltuva, of the University of Michigan (UM) School of Public Health, moderated a panel discussion of a case study on an organization that successfully overcame barriers while building its own safety culture. Representatives from The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW); UM; and the Ford Motor Company were able to create a confidential system for workers to report safety concerns, as part of an initiative to improve Ford’s safety culture, capture worker injuries and concerns, and mitigate potential hazards.

### Coordinating different safety cultures

WETP staff members Jim Remington, Ted Outwater, and Sharon Beard led breakout sessions exploring how safety culture operates during disasters at U.S. Department of Energy cleanup sites, and on overcoming barriers to worker involvement. During disasters, difficulty emerges regarding consistent messaging about hazards related to response efforts coordinated by federal, state, and local authorities. The dissemination of consistent health and safety information is complicated by the fact that each federal agency and contractor brings its own safety culture to disaster and cleanup areas. A common theme among the breakout sessions was that workplaces often emphasize metrics and production over safety. Many times, safety is stated as a priority, but, in practice, production rates and time constraints often outweigh concerns about worker safety.

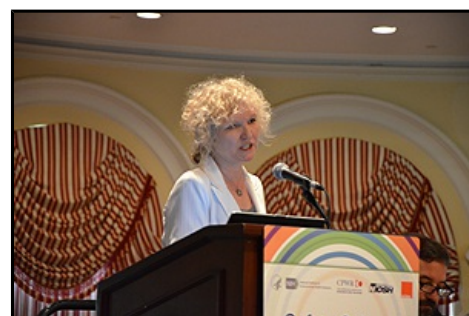
In his remarks concluding the conference, NIOSH Director John Howard, M.D., underscored the important role of research in supporting the themes discussed during the two-day workshop. Howard concluded that blame-free environments must be created and supported, and that when resources are committed, safety cultures can and do succeed. When organizations truly



Hecker, at the podium, gave a brief history of safety culture, putting safety culture into perspective with a look at how research findings inform the understanding of safety culture and climate. Stafford, right, gave the welcome remarks June 11 and introduced the shared plenary session speakers. (Photo courtesy of Ted Outwater)



Guest speaker Griffon offered insights into how effective an organization’s safety culture is, based on findings from CSB investigations. (Photo courtesy of Ted Outwater)



Daltuva is regarded as one of the top safety program evaluators in the U.S. She is research area specialist at UM and a contractor for evaluation of training for UAW. (Photo courtesy of Ted Outwater)

share the core values of a good safety culture, they are more likely to find a consensus when they need to cooperate in an emergency situation.

(Ryan Campbell is on the staff of MDB, a contractor for the WETP and NIEHS Superfund Research Program.)



*In their roles as ranking government safety officials, Moure-Eraso, left, and Howard were natural choices for closing presentations to inspire attendees to work toward deeper commitments to quality safety culture in the workplace. (Photo courtesy of Ted Outwater)*



*Hughes adjourned the workshop on June 12. He had also moderated the annual WETP Awardee Meeting June 10. (Photo courtesy of Ted Outwater)*

### **Toward a definition of safety culture**

CPWR Executive Director Pete Stafford introduced the concept of safety culture and said, “In planning this workshop, we realized there are many views of safety culture. There are [also] other industries with a different view and strong beliefs about safety culture.”

In the workshop’s opening plenary session, University of Oregon Associate Professor Emeritus Steve Hecker explained that the concept of safety culture is often misunderstood, and that it and the concept of safety climate need to be more clearly defined, because the terms are not interchangeable and one concept should not be more highly valued than the other. Hecker stressed, “Safety culture and climate are measurable and can have value as indicators.” As indicators, they can measure supervisory safety support, safety competence levels, and work pressure and safety.

Stafford and Hecker agreed that safety culture is a macro-scale term, referring to a subset of an organization’s overall culture and reflecting its mindset toward all of its operations. Safety climate, in contrast, more often refers to the transient, situation-specific or team-specific atmosphere that may or may not accurately reflect the organization’s overall cultural values. If the organization is committed to safety, the climate of a specific situation can be changed relatively quickly to better conform to an organization’s culture. In contrast, changing culture involves a much more difficult and time-consuming effort to fundamentally reshape attitudes from the boardroom to the workroom floor.

During the workshop’s closing plenary, CSB Chairman Rafael Moure-Eraso, Ph.D., reiterated the need to properly define safety culture, and emphasized the complex relationship between the organization’s culture and its safety performance. “Safety culture is not always a culture of safety,” he said. Safety culture is a characteristic of an organization with an overriding commitment to safety.

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